

about cross-subsidization that is both unfair to captive ratepayers and is decidedly anticompetitive. To the extent that any of these operations are paying less in insurance premiums than would be the case on a stand alone basis, Ameritech Michigan reaps an enormous competitive advantage. Second, such diversification, especially into high risk operations, also increases the likelihood that Ameritech and/or one of its subsidiaries may be the defendant in increasing levels of litigation.

The customers of Ameritech Michigan cannot be totally insulated from the financial risks associated even with operations housed in separate subsidiaries.

A catastrophic problem (or series of significant losses) that is devastating to the financial health and/or continued viability of any separate affiliate or subsidiary, may well affect more than just the shareholders of that separate affiliate no matter what structural safeguards have been put into place. The cost of capital of the local exchange company is established vicariously through the bond rating Wall Street conveys to the parent holding company (in this case Ameritech). If one of the unregulated Ameritech subsidiaries were to financially collapse or in some way trigger a downgrade, it would simultaneously affect the regulated subsidiary and their parent holding company and its cost of capital. That in turn would affect the utility and the ratepayers who could be deprived of funds that otherwise might have been received in the form of lower basic rates.

VII. Lessons from Divestiture

- Residential customers are the last to see the benefits of deregulation.
- Safeguards must receive as much regulatory attention as entry authorization into new markets.
- Dialing parity, permanent number portability solutions, and other practical implication of the competitive checklist are key to any chance of local

- competition becoming a reality for residential customers.
- Regulators must vigorously monitor marketing and advertising to protect consumers against deception and distortion.
 - In addition to making price and service quality performance information publicly available in a form that consumers can understand and use, regulators must be aggressive in preventing and punishing deceptive and exploitive marketing practices.
 - It cannot be overstated that competition will come unevenly for different customer classes and different parts of the state. This demands that regulators give careful attention to and analysis of the facts of competitive analysis and not propaganda.
 - Regulators must reject LEC attempts to have the best of both worlds by their insistence that they receive not only the privileges of competition but the benefits of being a monopoly. That is precisely the goal of "rate rebalancing" and other LEC gimmicks reminiscent of the divestiture myth of subsidized local rates.
 - Regulators must eliminate unfair monopoly revenue streams before entry into new markets is allowed.
 - Only regulators can play the needed role of consumer education in gathering, reviewing and making publicly available information residential consumers need in order to perform intelligently in any competitive markets that may emerge. That includes information about price and service quality performance.
 - Competitive market forces do not develop overnight and residential customer needs are the most inelastic and least likely to benefit from competition in the short run. In the absence of such market forces, government protections are essential. They must be removed only when, and only to the extent that effective competitive market forces can take their place.
 - Whether the benefits of competition are ever realized by residential consumers

depends in very large part on how vigorously regulators play their rightful role during this time of transition to ensure that safeguards receive as much attention as entry into new markets.

VIII. Conclusion

Ameritech Michigan would have us look at the competitive analysis as if it were an aerial photograph of the state with Ameritech Michigan's market in one solid color. By Ameritech Michigan's reasoning, as soon as one downward glance revealed even the tiniest speck of a different company's color in that market, Ameritech Michigan had demonstrated that it is in a competitive local market. That approach is unsupported by the language, purpose or history of Sec. 271.

MCF urges the Commission to conclude that:

- The local telephone market in Michigan is not competitive; the bottleneck has not yet been eliminated and long distance entry at this time is premature.
- Holding out long distance entry authority as the incentive for breaking up the bottleneck is essential.
- Regulators have the continued responsibility to ensure that the needs of local residential consumers are paramount; they must not be sacrificed for the theoretical benefit of long distance customers.
- The incentive of long distance entry authority is the only practical incentive for Ameritech Michigan to provide adequate service quality, and to invest in the network in Michigan.
- At present, the potential benefits of increased long distance competition as a result of Ameritech Michigan entry do not exceed the risks.
- Accounting and safeguard rules must be put in place with adequate resources and commitment to enforcement.
- The Commission must assume its vital consumer education responsibilities as stimulus of competition.

KENNETH E. MILLARD
President and Chief Executive Officer

444 Michigan Avenue
Detroit, Michigan 48226
Phone 313/223-7171

September 19, 1991

Detroit, MI 48202

A bill that's critical to the economic vitality of our state is now before the Michigan Senate. It's supported by a diverse, rapidly growing list of organizations and leaders from around the state including the Michigan State Chamber of Commerce and the Telephone Association of Michigan. I hope we can count on backing as well.

By modernizing the state's 78-year-old telecommunications law, Substitute Senate Bill 124 would help Michigan by stimulating the faster introduction of new products and services, lowering long distance rates, creating 150,000 new jobs in the next decade and maintaining reasonably priced, high quality phone service.

To give you more insight into the bill, I've attached a two-page news article written by the Gongwer News Service in Lansing on the latest version of the bill. Also enclosed is a one-page summary which our analysts have prepared.

As is true with any piece of legislation, Substitute Senate Bill 124 has groups with opposing viewpoints. Most of this opposition, we believe, is inappropriate -- favoring the status quo of regulation for companies like Michigan Bell and virtually unfettered freedom for our hundreds of competitors.

FROM: H.F.H.C.C.

- 2 -

I know that as a matter of corporate policy, favors marketplace competition. Since Substitute SB 124 would greatly increase competition in the telecommunications marketplace -- and stimulate the many positive effects which competition causes -- I'm asking that you support it and communicate your support throughout

If there's any more information I may provide about Substitute SB 124, I hope you'll call me.

Sincerely,

Kenneth E. Millard

Kenneth E. Millard

They don't care.
They don't have to.
They're . . .

THE PHONE COMPANY.

By Lawrence Budd

In 1987, regulators found that Ameritech had billed customers some \$2 million for expenses like airline tickets and corporate contributions . . . Could this be a preview of things to come? Does Ameritech have your number?

Many worry that with relaxed regulation and no legitimate competition, Ma Bell's aggressive successor may overcharge customers, skimp on investments and crush competitors looking for a place on the electronic frontier.

Ameritech is holding your keys to the information superhighway.

Since its creation 10 years ago in the government's break-up of the world's largest corporation, this Chicago-based multinational corporation has gradually adjusted its focus from customers and service to the bottom line and monopoly profits. In the coming decade, Ameritech will continue to control the lines providing you with plain, old phone service and connecting you with a booming plethora of services available in cyberspace, the virtual frontier of the 21st Century. With relaxed regulation and no legitimate competition, experts worry Ma Bell's aggressive successor will overcharge customers, skimp on investments in Ohio's telecommunications hardware and crush competitors striving for a piece of Ohio's telecommunications frontier.

Regulator Ashley Brown held a high opinion of Ohio Bell in the early 1980s. It was still the Cleveland-based arm of American Telephone & Telegraph, one of the most powerful corporations in the world, the public-utility equivalent of a benevolent dictator.

"They were slick. They knew what they wanted to do, but they were relatively up-front," said Brown, a commissioner of the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio for 10 years beginning in 1983, the year before the AT&T breakup.

Then Ohio Bell became part of the Ameritech Corp. and, Brown says, the company's executives "became less and less trustworthy. They began to use power in ugly ways."

"They told us what they thought we needed to know to do what they wanted us to do," said Brown, now doing utility policy work at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

"They became less and less concerned with local concerns and more and more interested in what the corporate muckety-mucks in Chicago said. Sometimes they were just flat dishonest."

The shift from warm-and-fuzzy Ma Bell to the cost-cutting aggressiveness of Ameritech has resulted in poorer service, but a fatter profit margin. In fact, Ameritech now takes pride in billing itself as "the most efficient" Baby Bell. In other words, Ameritech, which already has slashed 10 percent of its employees, squeezes more work out of employees who have survived the layoffs.

"Ohio Bell was known for providing quality service," Brown said. "Ameritech came to measure progress by how many people they fired. That was their view of human progress."

Brown's experiences with Ameritech, the monopoly provider of telephone service to most Ohioans, jibe with the findings of a nine-month investigation focusing on the Ohio phone company's operations.

Lawrence Budd is a Cleveland native who received his BA from Bowling Green University. He was a copy aide for *The Washington Post* and a reporter for several West Texas dailies. Most recently, he worked with the *Elyria (Ohio) Chronicle-Telegram* where he won awards for his investigative reporting. This piece appeared in a different form in the *Columbus Guardian*. Lawrence can be reached at 102741.3475@CompuServe.com.

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Among the findings:

1. In one regulator's words, Ameritech's response to customer calls has gone "in the toilet." For the past two years, some Ohio customers have had to wait hours, days, even weeks for Ameritech to answer customer calls — even though it is required by law to answer nine of 10 calls in 20 seconds. The PUCO, which fined the corporation \$30,000 early this year for failing to answer its phones, recently settled with the company after a full-blown investigation found a general deterioration in Ameritech's service. The company agreed to more than \$250,000 in credits to customers and promised to invest \$41 million. Ameritech also faces up to \$690,000 in fines by the end of the year, unless it meets state standards for repairs and installations — and answering customer calls.

2. Despite state and federal regulations, Ameritech has not only charged customers in the five-state region higher and higher rates, but also for expenses which should have been paid by the company or its stockholders, such as \$30 million for unused office space at corporate headquarters in Chicago and air fare to Dublin, Ireland. To settle its most recent run-in with government auditors, it agreed in July to pay \$675,000 and "make serious and substantive changes" to its bookkeeping.

3. Last year, Ameritech hired away a key Ohio regulator at the height of the case that would set the ground rules for relaxing regulation of phone service in Columbus, Cleveland and the rest of the company's territories in Ohio. The employee, who at public expense developed a national reputation, sat useless in PUCO offices and collected about \$10,000 in salary from the state, while Ameritech and an upstart competitor conducted a bid-war for his services.

4. In 1988, Ameritech representa-

tives dominated political machinations that led to the passage of the state law that allowed the company to take the first steps toward deregulation in January. Originally called "the most difficult and controversial bill that we will deal with" by a key legislator, a compromise version was passed in three days by a lame-duck session of the Ohio Legislature. A provision of the bill giving Ameritech "veto power" compromised negotiations in the January case, while another granting it an "exclusive franchise" in its territories has slowed the progress of aspiring competitors.

What does this mean to you, the customer with little choice? A monopoly without competition or strict regulation naturally charges more for its products, while providing fewer options. It is less likely to invest in new technologies, until it has squeezed the last dime of value from existing equipment. Rather than improving the product, the company can reinvest its monopoly profits in an advertising blitz or overseas ventures. You may find yourself steering along the information superhighway in an overpriced, technological Edsel. And service, an Ohio Bell tradition, could become a victim of the bottom-line mentality at Ameritech.

Ameritech Puts Ohio Customers On Hold

All Dick Butterworth needed when he called Ameritech in December 1994 was the routine relocation of two telephone lines, including one for his wife's home office. He left a message and waited for a call back. He waited, and waited, and waited.

"It was a shocker," said Butterworth, a long-time customer used to quick responses.

It wasn't as if Butterworth had called a private company expected to

cut costs to maximize its bottom line. By Ohio law, an Ameritech employee has to answer 90 percent of customer calls in 20 seconds.

"I waited. I figured someone was going to call," said Butterworth, a Columbus man overseeing the addition of a room to his Columbus home. "They never did."

Two weeks later, Butterworth called and was put on hold again. He hung up, but called back early the next morning determined to speak with a human being and reached an Ameritech representative who scheduled the work. Eventually, both lines were relocated and his wife was able to get work done for her employer — Ameritech. Butterworth's case was hardly an exception.

For two years ending in early 1995, Ohio's largest phone company failed more often than it met minimum quality standards for answering customer calls, affecting millions of customers. Ameritech Vice President James Smith dismissed the service problems as "bumps in the road." It was more like a complete breakdown. And the service problems continued — and multiplied — later in the year.

In three of the four months ending 1994, Ameritech failed to answer about half - or 1.2 million - of its calls, in the required time. The statistics, kept by Ameritech, would have been even more damning, except the company counted among its successes callers who hung up before a company representative came on the line.

From April 1994 to April 1995, 548 Ameritech customers were ticked enough to pick up the phone again and complain to the PUCO. "It was a 1,000-fold increase for us," said Rick Reese, who works in the PUCO public interest center which handled the complaints. (His first experience with Ameritech's poor service was as a customer forced to hold for long periods on several occasions before arranging

to have a second phone line installed for his home computer.)

For more than a year, while negotiating with Ameritech over relaxing regulation rules, the PUCO tried to convince the company to meet the standards without taking any formal action. In late 1994, the commission again asked the company to comply. Ameritech countered with a request for a four-month waiver.

Ameritech, its response time "literally in the toilet," according to PUCO compliance manager Michael Weiss, had the chutzpah to push the envelope further, to ask the commission not only to allow, but sanction, another four months of substandard service.

"For us, that was the last straw," Weiss said.

The reason for the terrible service: Ameritech cut almost 7,000 workers in 1994-95, including many customer service representatives who took an early retirement buy-out. At the same time, the company switched computer systems, requiring even the most expert representatives to leave customer service phones for hours of training.

Weiss and the PUCO were not amused. "It was the customer suffering here," he said. "Ameritech had all the capabilities to plan this conversion."

The PUCO investigated and found Ameritech had violated basic service standards. The PUCO could have fined Ameritech, which reported \$12.5 billion in revenues last year, \$1,000 a day, or about \$500,000. But the PUCO fined the company only \$30,000, provided it met state standards by March 1995.

"It sounds like a drop in the bucket," said Lyn Galli, a Hilliard, Ohio, housewife who complained to the PUCO. She waited three days to change the security code on her long-distance service after responding to a company flier explaining how simply she could make the change.

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Weiss acknowledged \$30,000 lacked any financial sting. In a week, Ameritech's chairman earns as much in salary and bonus - not including stock options and other compensation.

"The punitive damage is the bad press," Weiss said. "That's what they don't want." But the bad press was minimal. The commission did not announce what Weiss called an "unprecedented action." The *Columbus Dispatch* ran a short, superficial story on an inside page. There was little coverage elsewhere in the state.

Ameritech officials downplayed the entire episode, chalking it up to the company's push to upgrade its technology. Vice President Smith likened the problem to building a new highway. "Traffic slows down. But when the orange barrels go down, everybody's happy." In fact, the company has cut spending on technology, while upping its advertising budget.

For a few months, Ameritech managed to answer its customer service phones. But in August, the PUCO began another investigation of Ameritech's shoddy service, after finding the company was not only failing to answer its phones, but missing repair and installation appointments and signing up customers for services they never ordered.

Ameritech offered to hire 500 workers and spend \$41 million to correct the problems. In October, the company and the PUCO reached a settlement. Ameritech agreed to offer \$5 credits to 51,000 customers who were without phone service more than three days and \$45 credits to 370 people left out of the phone book. The company also faces up to \$690,000 in fines, unless it meets state standards by the end of the year.

The PUCO's Weiss proved to be psychic. Asked in early 1995 if he was concerned service problems might persist, he said, "It could very easily come up again."

And the enforcement strategy taken by the PUCO, a sliding scale of

fines based on returning to compliance by January 1996, suggests continuing suspicions that Ameritech might otherwise continue to let customer service slide. After all, what choice do customers have?

Have You Financed Ameritech Ventures in New Zealand and China?

For years, regulators and consumer advocates have found instances of Ameritech passing on to you and other customers expenses that should have been covered by the company or its stockholders.

"If it weren't legal, it would be called money laundering in any other context," said Kathleen O'Reilly a consumer attorney involved in the first management audits attempting to spot the accounting shenanigans.

By shifting costs to the local phone company and profits to subsidiaries beyond a regulator's full view, Ameritech and other Baby Bells could subsidize foreign investments in New Zealand or China, or speculative land deals like the now-bankrupt multimillion dollar plan by actress Kim Basinger to develop a tiny town in Georgia. (In fact, pension-plan funds, which are factored into your phone rates, were used to underwrite this loser.)

In July, the Federal Communications Commission and Ohio and Wisconsin regulators reached a deal with Ameritech, ending a two-year wait for findings of an audit of 1992 transactions between the local phone companies and Ameritech Services, which provides support services to Ameritech's local phone companies in Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin and Michigan. Ameritech agreed to pay \$375,000 to the federal government, \$200,000 to Ohio and \$100,000 to Wisconsin and make "serious and substantive changes" in its

bookkeeping. In exchange, the regulators agreed not to take further enforcement action against the company.

Often unable to follow the paper trail required by the FCC rules, regulators were forced to rely on interviews with Ameritech officials. Still they found Ameritech Services had improperly billed the local phone companies. ASI had leased unused office space at Ameritech's corporate headquarters in Chicago — a \$30 million expense to you and other customers. Phone company employees were transferred to ASI, which auditors said could have a "significant impact" on the portion of employee costs included in your phone rates.

Ameritech insists it complies with rigorous state and federal bookkeeping regulations. However, a February 1993 report by the General Accounting Office found the FCC lacked enough auditors to ensure that phone companies follow the rules. Its 14 auditors could cover all seven Baby Bells only every 18 years, while federal laws allowed no penalties after five years — and Congress plans to cut \$40 million and 150 FCC workers over the next year.

Those audits handled by FCC auditors found \$300 million in questionable charges, the GAO found. Double-checking work done by private accounting firms, the FCC found another \$130 million in mistakes. Even with more auditors, "We can't do 100-percent assurance," said Ken Moran, chief of the FCC's management audit division.

In 1987, regulators from Ohio, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Indiana, found Ameritech Services had billed customers about \$2 million for expenses

including: air fare to Dublin, Ireland, for a trade show, a contribution to the National Urban League, a company exhibit at the Pan Am Games, golf tees, a bar tab and gifts such as pens, umbrellas, polo shirts and orientation tapes about Ameritech's Chicago headquarters.

Their interest piqued, Wisconsin regulators returned in 1988 and found \$33.6 million in questionable expenses between Ameritech's corporate headquarters and its subsidiaries: \$13 mil-

Wisconsin regulators in 1988 found \$33.6 million in questionable expenses between Ameritech's corporate headquarters and its subsidiaries.

lion for advertising, \$8 million for salaries and wages and almost \$1 million for its fleet of French jets and hangars.

And in 1993, before the FCC went public with the most recent audit, Illinois regulators found Ameritech charged almost \$79 million in improper expenses to local customers there.

Even the most expert regulators acknowledge it's virtually impossible to spot all the questionable expenditures in the pages of financial data describing transactions between a Baby Bell's numerous regulated and non-regulated subsidiaries. "It's like finding a needle in a haystack," said Jose Rodriguez, the FCC's chief auditor.

Some say these audits barely scraped the surface. Earlier this year, a New York telecommunications analyst produced a report estimating the Baby Bells had overcharged customers by \$75 billion since the AT&T break-up in 1984.

In five reports spanning 1,000 pages, analyst Bruce Kushnick estimates Ameritech and its siblings, sup-

posedly held to fair profits through regulated rates, could have grown into some of America's most profitable companies only by overcharging local customers. Kushnick's report more than doubles a Consumer Federation of America report accusing the Baby Bells of \$30 million in overcharges.

On the contrary, says Ameritech Vice President Smith, the company has actually reported a loss in the past two years. "Regulators have looked at the earnings and decided they are appropriate."

A Star Regulator Uses the Revolving Door at the Worst Possible Moment

For years, Kurt Wesolek had considered leaving the PUCO for a more lucrative job with a telephone company. He had a wife and young daughter to provide for and a highly marketable and specialized expertise he had developed while on the state payroll. He chaired a regional panel of regulators created to monitor Ameritech and was nationally recognized as an expert in long-distance access issues, which are key to the ongoing relaxation of regulations that, since their creation, had barred the Baby Bells from offering long-distance service.

One supervisor referred to Wesolek as a "star." Another remembered him as a key member of the commission's team of regulators evaluating Ameritech's proposal to switch from traditional rate-based regulation to an alternative form giving the company the freedom to earn unlimited profits in some areas, while freezing rates in others. So it was especially difficult when Wesolek revealed to the PUCO in June 1994, a year into the deregulation negotiations, that he was talking with Ameritech about a job.

"He was pulled from everything

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he was working on," said Kerry Stroup, the PUCO's telecommunications chief. "It was frustrating for me. I relied on Kurt for his expertise."

About 20 companies and special interests, from the American Association of Retired Persons to the Legal Aid Society of Dayton, were involved in the case. Wesolek had written several pages of the staff report. Before announcing his job hunting, he had been scheduled to testify for the state — against Ameritech.

"He left me in the lurch. We were in the position of having to do a lot of catch-up," Stroup said. While his co-workers scrambled to learn his specialty, Wesolek sat in commission offices, serving only as a resource for his last-minute replacements.

"This was the biggest case we'd had in several years. This happened at the most inopportune time," Stroup said. "Whether Ameritech did this for some devious corporate strategy, I can't say. I can't stop and think about it."

Wesolek, a \$20/hour employee, was paid about \$10,000. The wait was extended, when Time Warner, a company wanting a piece of the Ohio market, entered the bidding for Wesolek. "He was in the enviable position of playing one entity off against the other," Stroup said.

In September 1994, Wesolek went to work for Ameritech. Under state law, Wesolek is prohibited from appearing before or filing any documents with the PUCO for one year. However, nothing would have stopped him from immediately working behind the scenes against his former employers and the interests of the telephone customers of Ohio.

Wesolek told his PUCO supervisors he had been approached by Ameritech. Ohio law prohibited him from talking to them first. However, several PUCO officials said he had been shopping the telephone companies for jobs for several years.

Ameritech officials say they're
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sure they approached him. Wesolek, who commutes on weekends between Ameritech's Chicago headquarters and his Columbus home, isn't talking about it. Reached by telephone, he said "I'm too busy to go into depth right now." He agreed to later do an interview, but never honored this agreement.

The Ohio Ethics Commission, the government institution charged with reviewing ethical questions involving commission employees, never looked at Wesolek's case. It was handled internally. "There was no case. This happens every day," said Steve Nourse, an attorney in a section of the Attorney General's Office serving the PUCO.

To an extent, Nourse is right. Jon F. Kelly, a senior Ameritech attorney, sat on the regulatory commission from 1981 to 1983. And at least four other former commissioners or staffers represented industry interests in the Ameritech deregulation case.

But Ronnie Fergus, Wesolek's boss and telecommunications chief before her appointment to the commission in early 1995, said Wesolek was only the second employee to resign from her staff.

Some experts take a harsh view of such cases and the inadequacy of "revolving door" laws supposed to protect the public interest. "It's god awful," said Nicholas Johnson, a former FCC commissioner now teaching at the University of Iowa law school. "It gives a bad perception as well as a bad reality. Perception is often more important than reality."

This fall, Wesolek will be free to represent Ameritech as the PUCO wrestles with rules governing competition and other hot telecommunications issues. This time, he will be taking the company's side, potentially opposing the interests of Ohio consumers.

Wesolek once aspired to politics. Perhaps he will someday hold an

elected office in Columbus, much like a former Ohio Bell employee, Dean Conley, the Ohio representative who sponsored the state telecommunications deregulation bill in the Ohio House of Representatives.

How Ameritech Used Political Influence to Legalize Its Interests

Since leaving his job at Ohio Bell, Dean Conley had become an influential state legislator and chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. At one time, he was touted as the next Ohio House Speaker. Conley was in the perfect position in 1987 when company representatives and Thomas Chema, the ambitious chairman of the PUCO, asked him to sponsor Ohio's telephone deregulation bill and shepherd it through the House.

Jackie Bracken, a lobbyist for the Ohio Consumers Counsel at the time, said she found a national pattern of Baby Bells cultivating employees in different states to push legislation favoring the companies' deregulation bids. Conley said his was a personal choice. Asked why the company approached him, rather than House Utilities Chairman Frank Sawyer, he said, "I used to carry a lot of real difficult issues." Sawyer's wife also worked for another telephone company.

Across the nation, states were deregulating telephone service, a key plank of the still vital Reagan platform. Nonetheless, other telephone companies, long-distance carriers and consumer advocates were skeptical of the original bill pushed by Ameritech representatives at Ohio Bell.

"There were a lot of differences on the bill," Conley said. The Legislature was also heading into an election year.

After a couple of committee hearings, the bill officially languished for

worried it may be used to unfair advantage in future negotiations.

And insiders say Ameritech wielded a "veto power" provision - criticized in 1988 by Spratley and declared unconstitutional in Utah - as a powerful hammer in negotiations ending early this year that relaxed regulations in Ameritech territories. Smith called the veto power provision "a check and balance in the system." But others who negotiated with the company say it would never have relented to dropping basic rates, except for \$92 million it had been caught overcharging customers in 1992-93.

Until the law is changed, Ameritech can operate more freely, making profits without limits for some services and charging you and other customers the upper end of price-capped rates for others. It could be years before competitors can get in the ring with Ameritech, forcing it to lower rates.

The Prospects for Competition

As a key assistant to PUCO chairman Chema, Barth Royer took part in the private negotiations that led to the 1988 deregulation bill. Today Royer works as an attorney for MCI Metro, a subsidiary of the nation's second-largest long-distance company, which wants to compete with Ameritech for local phone customers.

He says the lingering problems with the law and the PUCO's decision to relax regulations before there was competition have hamstrung his company's ability to offer Ohioans phone service at lower rates.

"You give Ameritech the best of

both worlds. You are allowing them to keep their monopoly position and begin pricing flexibility," Royer said.

While the PUCO wrestles with problems, such as whether you can take your number with you to a new company, competitors are faced with a dilemma. "If you wait until all these things are resolved, you're talking about years down the road," Royer said. "They'll be so entrenched." In other words, you could wind up with

Stroup hopes that companies such as Time Warner and MCI will be able to break Ameritech's grip on the market, forcing the monopoly to lower rates, improve services and offer choices.

little choice but to stay with Ameritech.

Ameritech has always had its critics. But only recently did the PUCO itself publicly chastise the company for its callous attitude.

"Senior management in Cleveland and Chicago are directed to make the necessary attitudinal and structural changes in the company's relationship with the Commission and its staff so as to ensure that this plan works smoothly for all concerned," the commission wrote in a summary of the settlement of the deregulation case.

As the PUCO's telecommunications chief, Kerry Stroup is charged with keeping Ameritech in line, at least until competitors get into the

market. Meanwhile, Ameritech can take advantage of the lack of competition - possibly compromising service and charging high rates to customers with no alternatives.

"With that comes the ability to abuse the system," Stroup said. The commission staff is checking phone rates to prevent Ameritech from overcharging, Stroup said.

But the PUCO must be careful to stay on open terms with Ameritech or risk the company blocking access to financial information needed to ensure customers don't get soaked, Stroup said. "If the information shuts down, that's not in my interest."

Ameritech's Smith responded: "We'd like to have a better, more open relationship with the commission. It's a very stress-

ful environment."

Stroup hopes that companies such as Time Warner and MCI will be able to break Ameritech's grip on the market, forcing the monopoly to lower rates, improve services and offer choices.

"The Legislature has spoken. We're in a position of trying to make it happen," Stroup said. "Until we can crack the market, Ameritech is in a position of power."

"They've got a 100-year start and all the customers," he said.

And a firm grasp on your keys to the information highway, the technological trail leading into the 21st century. ■